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ABSTRACT

This paper explains the educational objectives of an interpersonal communication course at a community college in a Minneapolis suburb. It first describes the nature of the college and its student population, on the basis that good interpersonal communication courses should be tailored to meet the needs of the students. The paper then shows how the course attempts to help students analyze their own communication patterns and change habits they decide may be limiting their success. It describes some of the class activities used, notes that the course emphasizes that communication is a transactional process, and points out course limitations with regard to some students. (GW)

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EDUCATIONAL OBJECTIVES FOR INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION FOR THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Nancy C. Bormann

(A PAPER PRESENTED AS PART OF A PROGRAM ON THE INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION COURSE IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE AT THE SCA CONVENTION, WASHINGTON, D.C., DEC. 2, 1977)

Unencumbered as I am by the need to impress colleagues, earn tenure, or protect an academic reputation, I am going to speak my piece in plain terms as to what my educational objectives are for a course in interpersonal communication at one community college in a homogeneous suburb of an upper-midwestern metropolitan area. I am well aware that if a dozen people who teach this course were asked their educational objectives, it might be very difficult to find much commonality except, perhaps, for the abstract one we all finally agreed on at Normandale--namely, that, if after taking Speech 100 our students have some more understanding and appreciation of the enormous complexity of human communication we would have achieved our major objective.

If in addition the students have been able, in any way, to demonstrate in communication transactions that they can translate this awareness into behavior, we would have achieved most of our goals for the class.

As a part-time evening class teacher I am not in the mainstream

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at Normandale; the daytime sections of 100 are so popular (over a thousand students took interpersonal communication at Normandale last year)--two people, Bill Chartrand and Linda Mease are kept busy. Others teach night classes besides myself; I understand David Dotlich teaches a more experiential class than I do. The day classes meet for a lecture section weekly and smaller groups for exercises; the night class meets once a week. All of us use the same textbook and a companion reader Bill and Linda Putnam put together last year. Aside from the common core of concepts in this material we have the lovely freedom to develop the details of the course in ways that seem to work best for each of us and that seem to fit the needs peculiar to each class.

Flexibility even within our relatively homogeneous student population is important because the range of motivation, needs, and learning abilities of our students varies a great deal. Night classes differ from day classes. Individual classes differ in both populations. When I taught day classes two years ago the majority of the students were just out of nearby high schools. Many referred to Normandale as "a high school with ash trays." These incoming freshmen varied particularly in terms of motivation. Bill tells me there are older students in the day classes now every year and he finds this, as I do in the night classes, helpful teaching the particular material we cover.

Costing half as much to attend as the nearby University of Minnesota, Normandale attracts some very bright students who prefer its convenience, smallness, and the fact that it is a

transferable bargain. Normandale also has well-used facilities and personnel for helping the slower student, the student with learning disabilities, the under-achiever, the retreads--back into the learning community. Nearly all of these students have a very pragmatic orientation. They want terms and lists and practical advice. They want to better themselves. They're trying to buy the key to a better life. Their suburban parents are prime examples of upward mobility and they want their piece of the pie.

The students in my night classes are often highly motivated for personal as well as professional reasons. There are always those who put off the course until they have to take it to graduate, but there are always some who take it because they've heard what it covers and want the material. The long hours--it is a 4-credit course and we begin at 6 and meet at least until 9:30--would be interminable without the stories that always surface--the marriage that might not have failed if he had known some of these things before; the terror of facing the police oral exam before you can be hired; the stunting effects of constant criticism and blame from parents who felt any word of love or acceptance might 'spoil the child;' the austere cultural norms of many with northern European heritages; a promotion that wasn't earned because he couldn't present a coherent report at the board meeting even though he had done an outstanding job and wanted to share it confidently; shyness and the devestating effects of a poor self-concept on one's communication. People are stuck in jobs that they consider "beneath" them; they want to learn how to

communicate themselves as persons of worth very much 'in the process of becoming' so that the world "out there" will give them the chance they feel they deserve.

In the beginning Normandale viewed its mission (as did the 17 other community colleges in Minnesota) as "feeders" for the older established four-year institutions which were then at the limits of their enrollment and needed help. Ten years later many of the four-year institutions need students and the community colleges, at least those that moved in the direction Normandale did, are faring very well largely because they have built excellent vocationally-oriented programs. Somewhat over a quarter of Normandale's students nowadays transfer elsewhere to continue their education. By far most of our students are enrolled in solid career-preparation programs which are complete right there--nursing, dental hygiene, law enforcement, secretarial, retail and marketing--to name a few.

In our interpersonal communication classes then we have students with a wide range of motivation and ability, nursing students who are taught in clinical situations never to disclose, together with law enforcement students very concerned with attaining and maintaining authority, alongside retailing students loaded with courses in salesmanship.

What our students do have in common is that they tend to be white, middle or upper-middleclass, Scandinavian Lutherans or middle-European Catholics. Normandale had one of the nationally ranked community college football teams this Fall. Its campus nestles solidly on a former corn field adjacent to the Japanese

garden fondly maintained by the Bloomington Garden Club. It draws its students from a metropolitan area of a million and a half sturdy people most of whom like the place and who drive around with bumper stickers reading "Pray for snow."

Why do I picture our college for you in such detail? Because I firmly believe that any good interpersonal communication course will end up being tailored for the community to which it is being taught. And by community I mean its students--the people in the class.

For me, interpersonal communication implies a concentration on relationship communication and relationships differ--breaking the silver cord and assuming viable symmetric communication patterns with their parents remains a major concern for many of those leaving their teens. The older students often consider their most important or dysfunctional current relationship one with a spouse, or with a child of theirs, or with someone with whom they are forced to work every day.

When Bill, Linda and I sat down to try to articulate our concerted objectives for the course we came up with this somewhat elusive phrase: "increased awareness of the complexity, pitfalls, and potentials of human communication." We try to help students journey back through the labyrinth that was their communication modeling, their own spiral of needs and habitual ways of responding--to find out some of their unique perceptual filters and help them to try to change habits they decide may be limiting their success.

I try to model what I teach to be good interpersonal communication (with the admitted exception of evaluation. I'm sure I evaluate with more aplomb than many because of my years of experience becoming a "mean Mother." Few students fail to point out this paradox but I assure them that they <u>are</u> evaluated the minute they open their mouths--even before--always have been, and always will be.) By the time they write their self-analysis of skills paper they have many perceptions to incorporate or rebutt--mine in addition to those of the other class members which they are given both in written and face-to-face exercises. I regard our classroom as a "safe place." These explorations into skills and values are not graded; only the tests and papers they write are "officially" evaluated.

It's hard to compress the amount of reading material we have now so I give weekly quizzes in addition to a written final examination. They tape their voices for me to critique; there's a lot of monotony out there in Bloomington. They are happier watching movies and filmclips about nonverbal communication than they are participating in exercises exploring how their bodies communicate, but they enjoy role-playing both relationship and conflict exercises. And for me, they wind up the course with a two-minute minipresentation of self, telling us about a book or an article or whatever they have found interesting which is directly related to the material covered in the course.

Woven throughout is the overview that communication is a transactional process; I threaten to flunk anybody who can't

give me a good, full description of feedback on the final.

I view my course as moving from the externals to the internals of the process--the 'mechanics' of voice and gesture to the perceptual processes influencing these behaviors to the cognitive and emotional factors predisposing each of us to communicate in a unique manner.

Too much. Of course we never manage, in the ten or twelve weeks we have, to make every student fully aware, much less--"better."

What happens to the inarticulate student (who takes tests well and passes the course easily) who goes out the door as inarticulate as when he walked in? He worries me. You, too, I'm sure. Putting him through public speaking next might help but he's had his required speech course and probably won't take any more.

Would public speaking have been better for him? Heavens no. He needed the material in interpersonal but he needs to learn to shape coherent, effective messages also, and after that, he badly needs shoring up in the area of learning to work more securely with other people; he needs small group communication as well. Sometimes this same student glumps what we've been covering with similar material he's had. "We had this stuff in psych, or sociology, or clinical nursing, or human relations, or in learning center self-help classes." But I can see, and the world can see, that his communication skills are still badly in need of help.

Teachers-teach-as-they-were-taught, not-as-they-were-taught-to-teach--isn't that how it goes? We certainly have a growing number of interpersonal concepts to teach; every new book adds terms to my growing list. We can work to change attitudes, shift (all right, clarify) values--hopefully increase awareness of some of the enormous number of factors involved.

Nevertheless, I have lived long enough to know that if my students walk in the door manipulators, they're probably going to walk out manipulators; I do warn them that there is a growing body of people who now recognize manipulative communication so they'd best shift gears--but some won't.

I tell them further that the man who can persuade a reluctant customer to buy a more expensive automobile than he had planned to in the morning, participate democratically in a community citizens group meeting deciding important civic matters that afternoon, and go home for an evening of actively listening, congruently disclosing communicative interaction with his wife and children--this growing, validated, masterful person is not a hypocritical schizophrenic--he is, in fact, an aware, functional interpersonal communicator--fully aware of the contexts and styles in which he is communicating at any given moment, and he remains constantly alert to the possibility that he probably isn't succeeding nearly as well as he thinks so he always, always demands feedback.

I'm waiting for that night--and it will undoubtedly come--when some wiseacre says, "Hey! You're describing my Mother. But she never took this course!"